Why Sandy Pope Wants to Run the Teamsters
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Would Any of These Guys Buy Jimmy Hoffa a Drink?
By Jennifer Gonnerman

Picture from YouTube

Alexandra “Sandy” Pope steps out of her apartment in Astoria wearing a jacket with the Teamsters logo, hood pulled up against the rain, strands of blonde hair poking out the sides. She drops her luggage in the back of her Ford Focus and slides into the driver’s seat. The rain picks up as she heads west, pelting her car with such ferocity that it’s impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. But Pope isn’t fazed. What’s an afternoon storm when you’ve done overnight truck runs in blizzard conditions, hauling steel from Cleveland to Baltimore?

Pope no longer drives a tractor-trailer, but she still spends much of her time on the road. Last fall, she announced her candidacy for president of the - International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and on a Sunday afternoon in March, she’s headed to yet another campaign stop, this time in Allentown, Pennsylvania, at a hotel bar, on a street called Bulldog Drive. In this race, she’s got some obvious disadvantages: Winning will require dethroning the

man with the most famous name in organized labor—James P. Hoffa, Jimmy Hoffa's 69-year-old son.

The Teamsters will nominate presidential candidates this summer at the union's convention in Las Vegas; the election will be this fall. But already the race is in full swing, with every week offering Pope yet another example of how tough it is to mount a national campaign when your opponent has way more money—and you have to drive yourself to every event. "It's like running for City Council and going to coffee klatches," Pope says, one hand on the stick shift. "But it's across North America."

This race is taking place amid one of the worst climates for labor in decades. Union membership is at its lowest point in 70 years, Republican leaders in states like Wisconsin and Ohio have launched a war on public employees' right to collective bargaining, and everywhere public pensions are under attack. As Pope put it in a recent speech, "We're getting the shit beaten out of us."

The Teamsters was once America's biggest and most fearsome union, with some 2 million members. Today it is down to 1.4 million, though it represents everyone from airline pilots to New York City sanitation workers. Pope presides over a small local in Queens, and five years ago, she ran in the national election for the union's No. 2 position. She lost but received more votes than anyone else on her anti-Hoffa slate.

Until recently, Pope was living in Montclair, New Jersey, and raising two kids. These days, the kids are grown and she's divorced, renting a second-floor walk-up near Astoria Park. The abbreviated version of her bio suggests a tough, glamorous Norma Rae: age 54 (but passes for 40), 33 years in the Teamsters, black belt in Tae Kwon Do. And her entrance in Allentown is suitably cinematic. She arrives in the fog, peering through the windshield for the Rodeway Inn sign, only to discover a billboard bearing her name propped in the bed of a pickup truck.

Inside the hotel's bar, past the neon Bud sign and the flat-screen showing The Simpsons, some two dozen Teamsters from Local 773 sit at small tables adorned with fake flowers. The men—and almost everybody here is a man—drink beer while they wait. Shortly after 6 p.m., Pope walks in, sporting her Teamsters jacket, fashionably faded jeans, and brown leather boots. The men stop talking, their heads pivoting toward the door.

There was a time when you couldn't find too many stories about Teamsters leaders without words like "indictment" or "prison" in the headline. The best-known leader, of course, was James R. Hoffa, who managed to hold on to his title of union president even after he entered federal prison in 1967. (His crimes: jury tampering, fraud, conspiracy.) Three and a half years after his

release, on a summer day in 1975, he famously disappeared from the parking lot of the Machus Red Fox restaurant outside Detroit.

Back then, Sandy Pope was a college student. She grew up in Milton, a suburb of Boston, with four older brothers, the sixth in a family of seven children. (Her father, a New England native, was a manager at an investment firm; her mother was an immigrant from Panama.) “She was the one that my brothers always wanted on their side of the football game, because Sandy was tough, very tough,” says her sister Victoria Pope, now the deputy editor of National Geographic. Pope finished high school in three years and went to Hampshire College at 17. Her plan was to become a lawyer, but then, during her junior year, she quit college altogether. As Victoria recalls, “My mother was incredibly upset.”

Pope, circa 1983, back when she hauled automotive parts for a living.

Pope got a job at a state psychiatric hospital, working as a “ward attendant” for minimum wage. She knew almost nothing about unions at the time, but then her co-workers went on strike for better wages. They were out for three days, and she stayed on the picket line around the clock. “I never slept,” she says. In the end, the workers won. “I couldn’t believe it,” Pope says. “I saw raw power. People with high-school educations suddenly feeling in control of their lives a little bit. I said, ‘This is what I want to do!’ ”

In 1977, she moved to Cleveland to join a group called Teamsters for a Decent Contract (later renamed Teamsters for a Democratic Union) whose goal was to stamp out corruption in the union. She got a Teamsters job, too, at an A&P supermarket warehouse. And when the warehouse shut down, she enrolled in truck-driving school.

During that time, Ohio’s steel mills were booming. Her next job: hauling steel, which meant being on the road for up to three days at a time, dropping off loads in Baltimore or Chicago, then turning around, picking up another load, and driving back. It was a dirty, dangerous job for anybody, much less a 23-year-old woman with zero experience. A few months later, she got a Teamsters job transporting auto parts for Ford.

She was virtually the only woman on the road. Whenever she wanted to shower at a truck stop, a waitress would have to shoo away the men first. And although most of her fellow drivers accepted her, she says, “every once in a while I’d get a jerk on the radio who’d say, ‘She should be lying on her back—not driving a truck.’ ” There were, however, plenty of times when she bested her male colleagues, hauling her loads faster than they did. Her secret was mapping out the routes ahead of time while they often got lost.

The job could be both boring and terrifying. Once, en route to Youngstown at 3 a.m., she hit black ice and did a 360-degree turn in the middle of the highway. But on nights when the sky was clear and she was chatting on her CB radio, the job held a certain appeal; at least she didn't have to sit in an office all day. Even today, she says, "I often think it would be nice just to go back on a truck."

She had been hoping for a turnout of 40 or more, but there seems to be only about half that number at the Rodeway Inn tonight. At the upcoming Teamsters convention, Pope will have to win 5 percent of the delegate votes to get her name on the ballot. That may not sound too tough—only about 88 out of some 1,750 votes—but most delegates are local union officials and unlikely to vote against Hoffa. Occasionally, though, a group of everyday Teamsters tries to win seats at the convention in order to support their candidate. That's what was happening in Allentown: Many of the Teamsters in this room were running in Local 773's delegate election, vying for the chance to go to Vegas and vote for Pope.

Her stump speech lasts about 30 minutes and includes the usual jabs at the Teamsters' leaders ("They have multiple pensions. Their houses are paid for … So what the hell do they care anyway? They could walk away if the union collapses before their eyes"), her view of Hoffa's salary ("Hoffa is making $360,000 with all his housing allowances … $300,000 is ridiculous"), and the requisite citing of her résumé ("As someone who started out as a warehouse worker and a truck driver, I'm sick of having a lawyer with a big name hijack our union").

These days, there's a sense of anger and betrayal among many Teamsters, a feeling that even though they invested heavily in helping Obama get to the White House, they have little to show for their efforts. If elected, Pope plans to get back to basics: stop writing checks to politicians and instead use the money to recruit more new members, target workers at nonunionized competitors, and end what she sees as Hoffa's autocratic ways.

But, of course, in an era when union-bashing has become a national sport, expanding the membership will be more difficult than ever. And without new, younger members coming in—without their dues money, their energy, their pension contributions—the union is destined to lose its power at the bargaining table and jeopardize the future pension payments of all its members. Which may be why some Teamsters are so eager to take a chance on someone new.

After Pope finishes speaking, the men take turns posing for pictures with the candidate. Barry Lagler, a 59-year-old warehouse worker with a gray ponytail, slings one arm over her shoulder. "How can I refuse a request from a beautiful lady?" he asks, grinning for the camera.

“She’s almost a rock star,” says Phil DePietro, former president of Local 773.

“Did anyone tell them she’s a black belt?” asks John Price, a UPS driver. “You shouldn’t stand that close.”

There are 407 Teamsters locals across North America, and only sixteen of them are led by women. One of those is Local 805 in Long Island City, where Pope has been the president since 2005. She represents some 1,100 people. Meanwhile, Hoffa has been the international union’s president since 1999.

Twice he’s been reelected, but there are signs he may be more vulnerable than in the past. Last year, he named longtime ally C. Thomas Keegel, the union’s No. 2 official, as his running mate, but then Keegel pulled himself off the ticket, citing his unhappiness with how the union is being run. And in January, the court-appointed lawyer overseeing the election publicly spanked Hoffa and his campaign. Their offense: trying to buy the support of three union officials who’d split with Hoffa by promising jobs and benefits if they agreed to back him in his campaign.

Fred Gegare, a former Hoffa ally, is running for president, too, raising the strong possibility that this fall’s election will be a three-way race. Pope considers this good news: If Gegare picks off enough of Hoffa’s supporters, she figures, she has a shot. Meanwhile, Hoffa’s campaign has set up a website mocking her candidacy and accusing her of having nearly bankrupted her local by overspending. Pope admits she has indeed spent a considerable amount of Local 805’s money—on trying to organize workers. She has mounted two campaigns to unionize FreshDirect employees but has yet to prevail.

Another line of attack against Pope is the fact that she is running on her own. “She has not put together a slate of candidates,” says Richard Leebove, a Hoffa campaign consultant. “She hasn’t put forward anyone other than herself, and that alone raises serious questions about her ability to unify the union.” (Hoffa is running with a slate of 28 people.)

And although Hoffa has been a lawyer since 1968, Leebove takes a shot at Pope’s blue-collar credentials: “She portrays herself in her campaign literature as a truck driver, salt-of-the-earth true Teamster, as opposed to General President Hoffa, who grew up in the household of the most important labor leader of the twentieth century,” he says. “I think Sandy’s career—coming out of a very expensive private school in Massachusetts [Hampshire] and growing up in a very upper-middle-class family—I think that’s a little false advertising.”

After leaving the Rodeway Inn, Pope crashes at the home of a Teamster friend, then wakes at 4 a.m. The plan is to squeeze in some campaigning before speeding back to work at Local 805. First stop is a warehouse near Allentown that supplies ShopRite supermarkets. From 4:45 to 6 a.m., Pope joins four other Teamsters outside in subfreezing weather, jumping in place to stay warm, handing out flyers to workers. At 6 a.m., they set off for a UPS hub in Bethlehem.

Nationwide, more Teamsters work for UPS than for any other company—some 240,000 full-time and part-time employees—and there may be no bigger task facing the next Teamsters president than negotiating the next UPS contract. Shortly after 7 a.m., UPS's part-time workers begin to stagger out of the building. These are the "pre-loaders." They start around 3:30 or 4 a.m. and put in about four hours, loading up the brown package cars used to make deliveries.

This used to be considered a college kid's job, but many of these workers are men in their forties and fifties who have been laid off from full-time jobs and are now piecing together income from multiple part-time gigs. The pay here isn't great—the starting rate is $8.50 an hour, same as it's been since 1997—but the job does promise benefits, if you can hang in there for a year.

"Hoffa sold you out big-time. You're getting shit wages," Pope says to one part-timer after another, handing each a flyer.

To one worker, she says, "You got sold out in the last contract."

"Yes," he says. "We did!"

By 9 a.m., Pope is back behind the wheel of her car, trying to warm her hands by rubbing them against her thighs. "I'd love to take a nap," she says. "Just pull over to a truck stop and sleep for a few minutes." But there's no time to rest; she has to make one more stop before heading back to Queens. A truck driver at a frozen-food warehouse she represents in New Jersey is about to lose his job. (He allegedly smashed into a pole while backing into a supermarket's loading dock and didn't tell his boss.) She pulls into the company's parking lot, and an hour later she's persuaded the worker's boss not to fire him, at least not yet. Pope argues that every driver hits the loading dock occasionally—or, as she puts it, "All of us have backed in and said, 'Oh shit.' "

Back in her car, driving toward Queens, she contemplates the next few months. Her plan is to keep doing her day job while winning over as many delegates as she can before the convention. She's been to three Teamsters conventions in the past and knows this year's won't be much fun, especially for someone who has the audacity to challenge Hoffa. Last time, when she

was running for the union’s No. 2 position, she left the convention floor to go to the bathroom, only to discover when she returned that someone had stepped to the microphone to attack her.

To defend herself, she recalls, she stood at one of the mikes on the floor and had to wait some fifteen minutes for Hoffa to call on her. Her words provoked the usual boos and catcalls. And afterward, in the hallway, she got the same response from her fellow Teamsters that she’s heard many times before: “You’ve got a lot of balls, lady.”